

Budget Committee Republicans reject help for troops

By [Rick Maze](#)

Times staff writer

The House Budget Committee was determined March 17 to just say no when Democrats offered a slew of ways to improve military pay and benefits by cutting tax breaks for the wealthy.

On a series of party-line votes, the Republican-dominated committee, which earlier had backed away from the idea of cutting President Bush's 2005 defense budget request, decided it could retreat no further.

Republicans on the committee rejected a \$2.5 billion package crafted by Democrats that included:

- \$1 billion for expanding health-care benefits for reservists and their families.
- \$1 billion to improve military housing.
- \$350 million for targeted pay raises for enlisted members.
- \$141 million in danger pay and family separation allowance increases.
- \$50 million to improve family support programs for reservists.
- \$14 million for public schools near military bases that teach many military dependents.

The money would have come from reducing tax breaks for people with incomes of more than \$1 million, a favorite target for the last two years of Democrats trying to pay for spending increases.

"During a time of war, it is shameful to dishonor the sacrifice of our military men and women by refusing them much-needed funds, which would improve their quality of life," said Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, who sponsored the amendment. "I am disappointed that when members of Congress could have taken a stand for better pay, housing and health care for our troops and their families, they went AWOL," he said.

Rep. Jim Nussle, R-Iowa, the budget committee chairman, denied the committee was doing nothing for troops. He noted the \$401.7 billion defense budget accounted for in the bill includes a 3.5 percent pay raise to reduce the gap between military and private-sector wages and funds the final stage of a multiyear plan to eliminate out-of-pocket expenses for service members who live off-base.

Other Democratic amendments rejected by the committee included a \$1.3 billion increase in funding for veterans' health care and \$500 million to improve military survivors' benefits.

However, the budget does include a \$1.2 billion increase in veterans' health-care funding above the Bush administration's request. That increase brings funding to the level that Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi said he had requested. Democrats wanted an even bigger increase, and proposed to fund it by reducing tax breaks for the wealthy, an idea rejected on a 21-16 committee vote.

The outcome of votes that pitted military and veterans' benefits against taxes on the wealthy was not unexpected. But the committee's 23-19 defeat of an amendment to set aside money for military survivors' benefits was a surprise.

"I was hoping and expecting they would put the money in," said Steve Strobbridge of the Military Officers Association of America, one of many military-related groups pushing for better survivors' benefits. Strobbridge had been optimistic because 31 of the 43 budget committee members are co-sponsors of legislation to improve the Survivor Benefit Plan.

While providing no money, the budget resolution approved by the committee proposes creating a reserve fund for possible improvements in survivors' benefits. The fund is empty, but money not used for other purposes could be put into it for future use to enhance benefits. Nussle promised military and veterans' groups he would work with other lawmakers to find money for survivors' benefits changes.

The Senate version of the budget does include money for SBP reform. As a result, the Senate Armed Services Committee can begin thinking about including SBP improvements in the 2005 defense authorization bill while the House continues to work on its budget blueprint.